

## Civil War Book Review

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### Seagoing War Machine: Men, Innovations Decisive For Union Navy

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## Review

### SEAGOING WAR MACHINE

#### Men, innovations decisive for Union navy

Feldhausen, Timothy J.

Fall 1999

**Ringle, Dennis J.** *Life in Mr. Lincoln's Navy*. Naval Institute Press, ISBN 1557507368

Dennis J. Ringle's **Life in Mr. Lincoln's Navy** is both a groundbreaking work of naval history and a pleasure to read. Ringle chronicles the Union navy from the antebellum reform movement to the steam-powered *Monitor*-class ironclad. Moreover, this well-researched book is a compendium of life at sea, viewed largely from the perspective of the enlisted sailor: what he wore, ate, drank, treated his illnesses with, and did with his spare time. The reader is introduced to the entire spectrum of a sailor's naval career, from his recruitment, training, and assignment to his death or discharge.

Using a wide variety of primary sources, including ships' logs and papers, naval records, sailors' diaries, and even letters, Ringle presents all aspects of Civil War naval warfare. Two topics deserve particular mention: the challenges of keeping ships adequately manned with trained and experienced sailors and the logistical system necessary to run the seagoing war machine.

The Union navy suffered from severe fluctuations in manpower at the outset of the War, but sound policy decisions and the foresight of leaders such as Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles produced a more stable influx of seamen. As it grew in terms of manpower, the navy underwent an uncomfortable transformation in warships, one that required a new breed of sailor. It is this movement from sail to steam that Ringle captures best.

Drawing on his own experience as an engineering officer, the author identifies the need for technical professionals trained to run the increasingly complex engineering plants of Union ships, such as John Ericsson's *Monitor*, as the impetus for the creation of the engineering ratings. The engineers, although

not initially welcomed alongside the tradition-bound deck ratings, quickly proved indispensable.

The logistical hurdles to supplying "Mr. Lincoln's Navy" with the requisite food, coal, and ammunition were enormous, particularly given the tasks the navy was charged with: enforcing a sustained and unprecedented blockade, supporting the Union army, and hunting Confederate vessels. Ringle explains in convincing detail how the navy developed the means of procuring and distributing materiel to an armada stretched along the coast of North America.

The navy was not alone in its resupply efforts. Ever eager to make a buck, sutler ships commanded by enterprising merchant captains helped fill materiel requirements that navy supply ships alone could not. This logistical success also helps explain why the Union sailor was better clothed, better trained, better fed, and more likely to survive combat injuries than either his army counterpart or his Confederate enemy.

*Timothy J. Feldhausen is a former naval officer who was once an engineer himself. He has taught history at the U.S. Naval Academy and is now studying law.*